

Mythbusters: ELL Edition

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Course Description

- This presentation will examine myths, misconceptions and realities for SLPs working with English Language Learners (ELLs).
- Participants will learn appropriate assessment and intervention procedures within the context of evidence-based practice and current state and federal policies.



Learning Outcomes

- Explain a **typical acquisition sequence** for dual language learners.
- Identify state and federal **policies and procedures** relevant to SLPs and ELLs.
- Describe **authentic assessment procedures** for distinguishing difference from disorder in bilingual children.
- Apply a **multi-tiered system of supports** that facilitate access to the curriculum for ELLs with speech-language disorders.



Acquiring English As a Second Language



Acquiring English As a Second Language

- English Language Learners are at risk for both *over-identification* and *under-identification* of language disorders.
- Understanding the normal processes and phenomena of second-language acquisition can help SLPs avoid making "false positive" identifications (identifying a *difference* as a *disorder*).



Normal L2 Acquisition Processes

- **Simultaneous** – L1 and L2 acquisition beginning before age 3
 - Simultaneous bilinguals acquire language milestones at similar times as monolingual children
- **Sequential** – L2 acquisition beginning after age 3
 - Sequential bilinguals do not always become fluent in their second language



Myth: Children soak up language like sponges"

- **Reality:** Many ELLs are in English-speaking classrooms where they understand nothing of what they are hearing. They are expected to automatically decode English and succeed academically.



Optimal Dual Language Instruction

- ELLs would ideally be taught in their first language 90% of the time and in English 10% of the time in kindergarten and first grade. By sixth grade, they would be taught in the primary language 50% of the time and in English 50% of the time.



Optimal Dual Language Instruction

- Studies have shown that children who are taught in this manner outperform ELLs who are taught mostly in English from very early in their schooling.
- This ideal bilingual learning situation helps children understand what they are hearing and builds their underlying conceptual-linguistic foundation (Brice & Roseberry-McKibbin).



Optimal Dual Language Instruction

- Ideal dual language instruction is not practical for many ELLs, especially for speakers of low-prevalence languages in ESL programs.



Normal L2 Acquisition Processes

- Interference or Transfer from L1 to L2
- Silent Period
- Code Switching
- L1 Language Loss



Interference or Transfer first language (L1) to English (L2)

- An English error may be due to the direct influence of an L1 structure.
 - Literally translated, the Spanish phrase, "***Esta pelota es mas grande,***" means "***This ball is more big.***"
 - A Spanish-speaking child who said, "*This house is more big,*" would be exhibiting *transfer* from Spanish to English.
- This normal phenomenon is evidence of a language *difference*, not a language *disorder*.



Silent Period

- When children are first exposed to a second language, they often focus on listening and comprehension.
- Some children speak very little as they focus on understanding the new language.
- Adults also do this when traveling in unfamiliar countries.



Silent Period

- Somewhat counter-intuitively, the younger the child, the longer the silent period tends to last.
- Older children may remain in the silent period for a few weeks or a few months.
- Preschoolers may be relatively silent for a year or more.



Codeswitching

- Children may switch between languages within phrases or sentences.
- For example, a Spanish speaker might say, *"I don't want that tortilla. Es demasiado dura. I can't eat it."* (It's too hard.)
- A French speaker might say, *"Je ne veux pas de homework."* (I don't want to do homework.)



Codeswitching

- Codeswitching, once assumed to be a sign of incomplete language acquisition, is a normal phenomenon seen in fluent bilingual speakers.
 - Codeswitching is commonly heard throughout bilingual cities such as Montreal.
- It is normal for dual language learners to have more fully developed vocabulary in some topics.



Language Loss

- As ELLs learn English, if the first language is not reinforced and maintained, they experience **subtractive bilingualism**, resulting in loss of skills and fluency in L1.
- Subtractive bilingualism can be detrimental to children's overall cognitive and linguistic development and academic learning.
 - If the parents do not speak English, it can also be very disruptive to family life.



Preventing Language Loss

- When the first language and culture are maintained and reinforced, children should experience **additive bilingualism**.
- The first language provides a structural foundation for learning a second language.



Social Language & Academic Language

• **Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)** is the everyday language that occurs between conversational partners, usually within known contexts.

• Under ideal conditions, it takes a typical second-language learner about two years to acquire social language skills.



Social Language & Academic Language

• **Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)** often involves reduced context.

• Under ideal conditions, it takes five to seven years to develop academic language commensurate with native speakers.

• Many ELLs struggle with CALP and have difficulty in areas such as reading, writing, spelling, science, social studies, and other subject areas where there is little context to support the language being heard or read.



Social Language & Academic Language

• A child may be labeled as fully English proficient on the basis of ability to answer a question such as "what are your favorite foods?" or respond to a request to "tell me about your family."

• These skills measure BICS.



L2 Language Acquisition

The "bottleneck hypothesis" (Slabakova) states that functional morphemes and their features are the bottleneck of L2 acquisition; acquisition of universal syntax, semantics and pragmatics flows smoothly.



In order to acquire syntax and meaning in a second language, the learner has to go through the inflectional morphology.



Functional Morphology

- Carries information about grammatical meanings through interpretable features (e.g. tense, aspect, definiteness, etc.)
- My sister often take-s the bus.*



Complex Syntax

- Processing **complex** syntax (multiple embedded clauses, *wh*-movement) may be affected by lack of experience with specific constructions as well as working memory or processing limitations.

Peter noticed that the fact that the cage was empty surprised Sofia.

What did Peter notice? What surprised Sofia?



Social Language & Academic Language

- The “**BICS-CALP gap**” can lead to problems of over-identification and under-identification.
- Falsely assuming that an ELL is struggling with academic language due to a language-learning disability.
- Assuming that an ELL just needs more time to learn the second language, when in fact they may have a language-learning disability.



The Bilingual Brain

- Brain imaging studies show that different languages are processed in much of the same brain tissue.
- During codeswitching, bilinguals show significantly more activity in the right hemisphere than monolingual speakers, especially in the dorso-lateral *prefrontal cortex* (the source of attention and control). (Kovelmen et al.)



The Bilingual Brain

- Bilingual preschoolers are better able to focus on a task while tuning out distractions than their monolingual peers.
- Bilingual adults also have enhanced ability to concentrate and working memory.
- It is hypothesized that managing two languages helps the brain's ability to focus while ignoring irrelevant information.



The Bilingual Brain

- Bilingual adults have denser gray matter, especially in the left hemisphere, where most language skills are controlled.
- The difference is greatest in people who learned a second language before age five, and those who are most proficient with their second language.
- This suggests that being bilingual from an early age alters the brain's structure.



Benefits of Bilingualism

- Some monolingual parents and educators fear that exposing children to a second language might delay their language skills.



Benefits of Bilingualism

- Bilingual children reach language milestones (such as first word and first fifty words) at the same age as monolingual children.
 - They do not show evidence of being "language confused."
 - From the first days of life, infants use rhythmical cues to keep their two languages distinct.
- Vocabulary in each language will probably be less but when the languages are combined, it is the same or greater.



Benefits of Bilingualism

- Children who are fluent bilinguals outperform monolingual speakers on tests of metalinguistic skill.
 - (awareness of language and the components of language, such as phonological awareness)



Benefits of Bilingualism

- Being fluent in two languages, particularly from early childhood, enhances a person's ability to concentrate.
 - (Attention center of the brain is more developed.)
- Bilingualism may also protect against the onset of dementia and other age-related cognitive decline.



Benefits of Bilingualism

- In a global economy, children who are fluent bilingual speakers are a valuable resource.
- Government agencies are also promoting retention of the first language, as there are shortages of qualified bilingual speakers for these jobs.
- Many Americans are finding that there would be advantages in their professional lives if they spoke a second language.



Acquiring English as a Second Language

- SLPs should also be aware of the risk of *under-identification* of language disorders in English Language Learners.
- This is typically due to an assumption that the child's language behaviors are *all* attributable to the second language acquisition process.
 - It is very important to compare the child to peers of similar age and cultural/language background.



Acquiring English as a Second Language

- SLPs will make fewer errors in identifying ELLs with language differences and disorders if we are aware of the normal phenomena and processes that accompany learning a second language.



Supporting Bilingualism

- Ideally, we will support children's first languages and cultures, and encourage them to become fully proficient bilingual speakers.
- Maintaining the first language will result in better academic performance.



Bilingualism and Developmental Disabilities

- Evidence suggests that children with special needs (including Down syndrome, autism and Williams syndrome) can become bilingual.
- Parents should be encouraged to speak to their children in the language of their choice.



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